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WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM,
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA
AND RELATED INTOLERANCE

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Item 9 of the provisional agenda

CONFERENCE THEMES

NGO contributions

Contribution* submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The secretariat has received the following written statement, which is transmitted to the World Conference.

* This contribution is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

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ENG

When the perfect order prevails, the world is like a home shared by all; peace and trust among all people are the maxims of the living.

Confucius

Our planet provides a home to over six billion of us: six thousand million unique individuals, each with his or her own story, personality, mind and spirit. And yet amidst such diversity, if we look into a global mirror of the human heart, how many of us do not cherish being loved, respected, understood and accepted? Do we not all seek to be happy and at peace with ourselves and those around us? It is a fundamental and indispensable part of who we are as human beings, of the very essence of humanity, that we have both the desire and capacity to give to others and to receive from them affection, regard and recognition. We aspire to a life in which we have freedom, are treated with dignity and respect and enjoy the same rights and privileges as others. Our vision is of a society in which there is equality and harmony, security and friendship, mutual understanding and kind-heartedness, where we are sustained and nurtured by our culture and enjoy a solidarity amongst people and a brotherhood and sisterhood of the spirit.

We have not lost this dream, and we must never lose it – neither for ourselves as individuals, for the inherent worth and sacredness of every human person mean that this is our right, nor for the entire human family of which each of us is a member, for our conscience and innate potential for good tell us that this our responsibility.

It is therefore heartening to see that around the world, people from all walks of life and all sectors of society are coming together, in spirit, if not in body, to form a truly global movement of the mind for a better world and harmonious human relationships. Such steps are more than just rungs on a wishful ladder to utopia; they are also a critical and urgent necessity. For while the momentum for change has increased and is finding many forms of expression, are we really any closer to fulfilling our age-old ideals?

Welcome progress has certainly been made in some areas but the world is never static and changing times bring with them new wrongs and indignities that must be addressed. If we undertake an open and honest stock take of world affairs today it is apparent that profoundly divisive, discriminatory and exclusionary forces have been unleashed and are at work within the world. We can see that the world is globalizing but society is disintegrating, and many everyday encounters have become potential flashpoints. Technology is bringing peoples and their lives together in many different ways but too often in a clash of civilizations rather than in dialogue. There is continuing discrimination against people on the basis of their descent. Women and children, in particular, are being trafficked or sold into slavery and predominantly they come from a few particular races or backgrounds. Migrants and refugees who flee injustice, prejudice, lack of opportunity or environmental degradation at home find themselves, on arrival at a new destination, victims of discrimination or intolerance on account of their race. Even otherwise well-educated people can allow ignorance or irrational fear of the unknown, or of loss or identity or position, to mutate into intolerance or prejudice in relation to those of different ethnicity, traditions, religion or culture.

While the situation is worse in some places than in others, regrettably no country or community can justifiably claim itself to be completely free of discrimination. In short, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance are a scourge with deep and widespread roots in the past and a creeper-like stranglehold on the present. When, as they so often do, these factors interact with forms of vulnerability such as gender, age and economic weakness, the result is a particularly poisonous recipe for the multiple violation of human rights that quickly brews into other social upheavals and conflict.

This life's five windows of the soul
Distort the heavens from pole to pole
And lead you to believe a lie
When you see with, not through, the eye.

William Blake

While this intersectionality of susceptibilities to abuse means that responses must incorporate various perspectives, discrimination should also be targeted by itself in view of the fact that its ultimate origin lies solely in the human mind, regardless of any external factors or conditions. Simply put, racism is a totally ideological construct, an acquired attitude of mind. It is learned and ingrained; it is never an inherent quality of the human spirit. People are not originally racists but become them. As humanity has strayed from the quintessential goodness of its divine roots, and human culture continues to drift from its spiritual moorings, an increasingly materialistic mindset has gripped our psyche. We have conditioned ourselves to view others according to their outward appearance and circumstances. Identification with the body has dethroned a natural consciousness of the self as the soul; arrogance of the physical has replaced wonder for the spiritual. Progressively blindfolded to the non-materialistic, we have stumbled into a dead-end of superficiality, defining ourselves by the ephemeral body and its transitory trappings of fame and fortune. Having forgotten the soul, and its inherent worth, we have ceased to recognize and respect our own worth and dignity and therefore also that of others. The root cause of racism and discrimination is thus a crisis of identity at the individual and collective level.

So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Galatians 4:6

Although the measures necessary to combat racism must take many forms, if they are to be truly effective they must be grounded in spirituality. It is not a solution to counter abuse or discrimination with more of the same. One cannot simply legislate for love and tolerance. It is also not enough just to cut a weed off above the ground; one must dig beneath the surface, identify the roots and then remove and burn them. And the roots of racism are to be found in the thoughts and attitudes that all of us have acquired over many generations. Bringing about the required reformation of attitudes and ways of life requires a process of healing, accompanied by the re-discovery of the true self and re-identification with the unity of the larger human family.

Seek help through perseverance and prayer; surely Allah is with those who patiently persevere.

Koran 2:154

Animosity, ingrained prejudice and discrimination, often based on totally unfounded notions of the inferiority of others, and then institutionalised over the years, have inflicted many ugly wounds on humanity. Intertwined with issues of justice and the settling of accounts or reparation on an external level, there are inner scars that need airing and healing. In this regard, it is both parties involved in discriminatory action who must be healed. Abuse defiles the victim, but its perpetrator also debases and dehumanises himself.

We must win our freedom by deserving it, by improving the mind and enhancing the dignity of the individual, loving what is just, what is good, what is great, to the point of dying for it. When people reach these heights... the idols and tyrants fall like a pack of cards and freedom shines in the first dawn.

Jose Rizal

The process of achieving both the making-whole again of the individual and the reconciliation of society is likely to be long but must never be considered to be an impossibility for the indomitable human spirit. When provided with a safe and nurturing environment in which to express and be their own true

selves, when listened to, accepted and treasured, supported and validated as human beings with their own unique worth and inner beauty, when respected and loved in their own right, even deeply scarred individuals can begin to heal. In this task, each of us has a role to play, acknowledging the value of life, drawing inspiration from and then demonstrating the personal transformation and self-redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation that others have modelled to us.

But while we must come to terms with and learn from past realities, however tragic, and while their wrongfulness must be acknowledged, we must not let them blind us to present truths or allow them to cast a self-perpetuating shadow over the future. Education and achieving a new understanding are crucial to all our efforts to eradicate the plague of racism that still blights humanity's face.

Education is not only a right in itself but also a through-road to the enjoyment of all other rights. Foremost amongst these is the right to know one's own true identity as a being of inherent and inalienable worth, a child of the Divine even – to be able to define oneself by reference to the spirituality that is the core of our being and gives rise to our worth and rights. A distinction must be made between the physical and perishable matter of the body and the non-physical and eternal inner being. It is the soul, the repository of our values, beliefs and personality, that defines our identity more than the body through we express such qualities. The self-respect that springs from such self-knowledge is both the foundation of respect for others and also a powerful shield against abuse; we may be deprived of other rights but only we can deprive ourselves of our own self-respect.

Understanding the sacredness of each person opens the door to perceiving the essential oneness of the human family. People of spirit have long claimed this and now recent genetic research, looking at our biological blueprint, has shown a striking homogeneity within humanity; in fact there is a vastly greater genetic variability within any particular race or group of people than there is between individuals from different races or groups. Biologically as well as spiritually we are all integral members of just one human race and the ways in which we are different are far less significant than the ways in which we are the same. We have and are entitled to our own cultural, social and national identity but we share a common identity as fellow human beings and are equal in dignity and worth. Harmony and unity among people can be built on this common ground and we can then understand, respect and even welcome difference rather than fear it.

The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in ...mental attitudes and values... Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the inequities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration...

Aung San Suu Kyi

A spiritual approach is not one that is divorced from immediate concrete action; in fact it must imbue our action. If principles are to be turned into practice at the grassroots level where they are needed, in the hearts and minds, attitudes and behaviour of people, such an approach must find expression in the form of values-based educational programmes. Teaching tolerance, understanding, respect and responsibility both in and outside the classroom, from early childhood, is crucial in order to deconstruct the negative stereotypes and perceptions, the conceptual boxes and mental straitjackets that society has tied itself in.

The Brahma Kumaris have been teaching practical spirituality and values for many years and found such a practice to be particularly effective in dissolving barriers and bringing together people of different communities and cultures. They would gladly extend their expertise to work with other interested parties in the development and implementation of comprehensive, timetabled educational programmes to promote peaceful coexistence, unity and harmony within and among peoples. The

mountain we must climb is lofty, no doubt, but there is room on the high road for all of us and we must walk it together as brothers and sisters, side by side and heart to heart.